

“These are my beasts,” says Kristan Horton with a sly grin. He ambles coyly into a small, enclosed space set off to one side of the otherwise natural light-filled, airy Jessica Bradley Annex in Toronto, and in a blink, you see what he means. In a black-and-white photograph, a pair of figures—slicked with sweat, their faces torqued and distorted into lascivious, primal grins—sit side by side, staring out from within.

“*Marty and Klaus*,” Horton laughs, with a bemused glee. The eyes in the photograph are dull and mindless, or wild, inhuman. Look closer, and the pores of one face stand out enlarged, like scars from a puncture wound, repeated hundreds of times. “To me, it’s like *Raging Bull*, the brothers, at the end of the film,” he says, referencing the moment when Jake LaMotta, the punch-pounded heavyweight the film biographies, stands fast and absorbs blow after blow from his younger brother, Joey, for all the hurt he’s caused.

In the arc of the Martin Scorsese film, it’s a cathartic scene—a letting go, and a way forward. For Horton, this picture plays the same role. For months, he had been living with his beasts, dozens of them—violent things, twisted and warped into subhuman horrors. It began on an ad hoc residency in Sligo, Ireland, in 2011. Spontaneous self-portraits, taken at arm’s length with an unremarkable digital point-and-shoot camera, became an exercise in simultaneity.

Horton would layer them on the computer, forcing differing movements, expressions and poses to live together in the same instant, giving privilege to none. Some of the works were composed of only four distinct pictures; others took dozens. When Marty and Klaus had done their time on his digital operating table, he was done.

“That’s where it stops,” he says. Because with Horton, it always does. You can see this in the arc of his career, now spanning almost two decades: intense fascinations, exploited with an obsessive’s devotion and an

absurdist’s glee, consumed, burned through and then dropped for the next.

“I do things in series,” he says, affably matter of fact. “And then they terminate. At a certain point, I know that I do not need to explore this any further.”

His points of departure can be so far-flung as to bewilder. Horton sculpts and draws; he animates and films and photographs and engages, here and there, in animatronics (his graduate thesis project was an assemblage of a lawn chair and an umbrella that folded and unfolded daily with the sun, like a huge, artificial flower). Recently, he’s taken up painting. When I ask if he’s ever done that before, he stifles a giggle. “Nope,” he says, finally. “But it turns out I’m quite good at it.” In his studio in Berlin, where he’s now based, there are 30 small-scale gouache works, with more to come.

So hectic and broad is the Horton oeuvre that only the closest study can claim to know every element. There is the one work that everyone knows, though: *Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove* (2003–06), the 200-image-strong piece—for lack of a better term—that took Horton three years to produce. Completed in 2006, it was installed at the Art Gallery of York University the following year. It hung not unlike an unrolled spool of film, in a long, single line, end to end.

With the installation, Horton had it be seen as he saw it: as a logical system, and a manifestation of hands-on learning. His text, Stanley Kubrick’s absurdist Cold War film, was an already-embedded cultish fascination.

Horton took this fascination one step further. He rebuilt 200 distinct scenes from the movie, using whatever materials lay at hand in his studio. The bomber carrying the nuclear payload, soon to be dropped by the jingoistic renegades that form her crew, sits grounded at a shadowy air base; Horton’s rebuild shows a knife and two forks splayed in the frame in exacting proportion to the bomber on an uncannily accurate, black-and-

KRISTAN HORTON turns obsession into art • BY MURRAY WHYTE

# A MANIC JOY



**Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove**  
(detail) 2003–06 200 giclée prints  
on archival photo paper mounted  
on Dibond 27.9 x 76.2 cm each IMAGES  
COURTESY THE ARTIST/JESSICA BRADLEY GALLERY

OPPOSITE: **Chatter (Study)** 2012  
Tiled archival inkjet prints mounted  
to Gatorboard with double-sided acid  
free tape 1.65 x 1.25 m



**Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove**  
(detail) 2003–06 200 giclée prints  
on archival photo paper mounted  
on Dibond 27.9 x 76.2 cm each

grey ground. The inevitable mushroom cloud, seen in the film as a distant pale glow haloed in smoky grey, is equated with a carefully arrayed pile of popcorn that matches its shape and size in the frame with uncannily perfect imperfection.

The work was a hit, with feature coverage in major daily papers, a persistent presence online and an almost mythic reputation in Toronto, where Horton lived and worked at the time. The fact that it remains uncollected by any of our major institutions is one of the Canadian art world's great mysteries (Horton's initial insistence that all 200 images be kept together as a single edition might have had something to do with it, he says). This spring, in his mid-career survey, "A Haptic Portrait of Groping Imagination," at Barrie's MacLaren Art Centre, he showed an excerpt of the work. ("Nobody has space for the whole thing," he shrugs.)

The piece is hilarious for its bizarre labour-intensity, but also jarring: a tight little bundle of popular-culture obsession cross-fertilized with both a critical eye for artifice and representation and a gleeful embrace of materializing fiction, in a very physical, hands-on way.

The sense of Horton as a kind of mad professor, gathering armloads of random cast-offs strewn about his studio to build miniature film sets with whatever might be around—a TV remote control becomes the control panel of a missile command centre; a stove element, the blurred image of a knife and a grain of rice mimic, with laughably lacking verisimilitude, the sweep of a radio signal on a radar screen—is both inevitable and endearing. Horton won the Art Gallery of Ontario's Grange Prize in 2010, and the display of *Strangelove* surely had much to do with it. The prize is voted on by the public; Horton's appeal, both instantly recognizable and hilariously absurd, knocked it out of the park.

**NATURALLY, HORTON'S** next move was to abandon the technique completely. The next series, made public in 2009, was a collection of large-scale digital photographic compositions, called *Orbits*. They were gorgeous, seductive things. In full colour, Horton had overlaid multiple distinct pictures of the same mound of studio detritus, shot from different perspectives as he circled it, slowly, on foot.

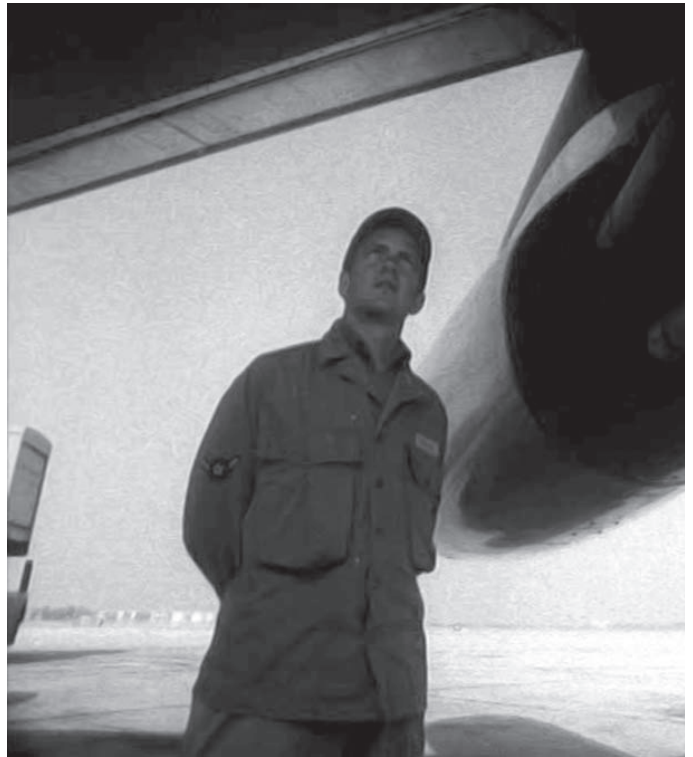
The result was vivid, densely layered collages that read almost as abstractions but for the jarring yank back to reality that Horton lays, like a trap, in each (at the centre of my favourite one, *The Original*, the dark crimson and black are hazily but unquestionably derived from a cast-off vinyl record album lurking at the bottom of the pile).

They were successful. The National Gallery of Canada acquired two, putting them in their first biennial, "It Is What It Is." But following on *Strangelove*, the response was not immediate. "I could see, when I first showed them, that a lot of people were really turned off," he says. "You know, 'Where's the black-and-white diptych?' I never meant to make the *Orbits* colourful, in a way quite beautiful things—and yet, there they were."

Horton laughs, which, when he does, is always an infectious, almost overpowering thing. He is tall, and rakish, with an easy charm and a warm approachability. He is, it seems, always smiling, as though filled with an expectant delight for the wonders he's yet to unpack.

"It's funny," he says. "I often call my aesthetic something I arrive at. And I celebrate my arrivals in these foreign lands—the more foreign, the better."

When I ask him if having created a work like *Strangelove*, with its sudden





popularity, made him leery of branding himself and creating a narrow set of expectations for his work, he doesn't hesitate. "Not at all! I love it!" he effuses. "Every artist should be so lucky, to make one work in their lives that touches a nerve with so many people."

He casts his mind back to the time when *Strangelove* was in the afterglow of its acclaim, to a conversation with sculptor Robin Peck. "I really like Robin. I respect his toughness," Horton says. "But I remember him saying, 'Okay, what you have to do next is...' and he mentioned some building in Germany that was somewhat iconic in the war. He said, 'Copy that one next.' And I appreciated him saying that. I really did. But the artists I always looked up to, what bound their work wasn't necessarily the media, or even the procedure. There was something else."

Horton mentions Bruce Nauman, the great American polymath whose artistic efforts span every possible media, and things fall quickly into place. Nauman, with his voracious curiosity for both materiality and mediated representation—video, photography, all forced through the filter of his particular quirks—is also an unabashed enthusiast for his subject matter, exalting in everything he does with a particular, and unapologetic, absurdist joy.

Horton smiles, "He acknowledges that what he works with may have cultural meaning, but he purposefully ignores it in order to ramp up its emotional content. He doesn't sand his corners down. Instead of having a preconceived idea of where he needs to go, he goes until he finds the point where he needs to stop. And that's a lovely distinction, I think."

**HORTON IS A VORACIOUS** consumer of ideas and texts, burning through fiction, analysis, history and dense theory with equal fire. The *Sligo Heads* (2012) take as much from 18th-century sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt as from technology. In constant pain from Crohn's disease, an affliction Horton shares, Messerschmidt would pinch himself violently on the ribs, trying to deflect one pain to another. He did so in the mirror, and his *Character Heads* (1770–83), a series of grisly self-portraits of his painful contortions, is the result.

Horton's recent obsession has been Michel Foucault's book on playwright and novelist Raymond Roussel; "His plays are polished gems of this insane attention to systems," he says. "Imagine brackets within brackets within brackets." Another predilection of Roussel's that Horton admires is his hermetic nature: "He had this thing about going to foreign places, but he'd really just look out the window at them. And I think I'm very much the same."

Indeed, Horton's practice is deeply rooted in the studio. You could almost cast his entire oeuvre as weirdly diaristic document of the world contained within those four walls: from *Strangelove* to *Orbits* to his earlier, hilarious photo series *False Generators* (2007), featuring cobbled-together makeshift machines constructed from found images that ooze an amorphous goop, to *Sligo Heads*, each body of work has the suggestion of its maker down the rabbit hole, gleefully groping for things in order to build a way back to the surface.

An abundant humour runs through all of them. One of Horton's signature works is the six-minute animation *Cig2Coke2Tin2Coff2Milk*, from 2006, in which the commercial packagings of each of the titular bits are transformed into one another, cut by cut and fold by fold—thousands

of them, one would have to guess—and set in motion (if it puts you in the mind of Thomas Demand, you're not wrong).

The labour-intensive questioning of the very material objecthood of things stretches way back: four years out of high school in 1991, Horton made one of his first such works, *Stock Construction Vehicle (Domestic Escape)*, in the basement of the home of his very understanding parents, by stripping drywall off the walls and building it around a coffee table.

Gleefulness and a passionate, overpowering sense of play are both central parts of the Horton oeuvre—and always have been, according to those who have known him longest. Last winter, Ben Portis, who curated the MacLaren show, travelled to Horton's parents' house in Collingwood, Ontario, to collect works in storage there.

"It was just remarkable, to go to their home and see this shrine, really, to this boy who, since he was small, had always made things," Portis says. After the opening of "A Haptic Portrait of Groping Imagination," Horton stuck around to deliver a lecture to art students at Georgian College in Barrie. He and Portis circled back to the gallery for some housekeeping. They stumbled into an art camp of seven- and eight-year-olds there, whose teacher recognized Horton and asked if he might come say hello to the class.

"When she introduced him as the man who had made all these things, their jaws dropped. They were captivated," Portis says. Horton asked if any of them had questions for him, and immediately a dozen hands shot up. "One of them asked him how he became an artist," Portis says. "He answered, 'Well, when I was about your age, I started making things, and I never stopped!' There was just this beautiful joy about him in that moment."

Joyful is a good way to describe Horton's manic curiosities. Alongside his main works run seemingly endless inquisitions. Overlapping with the production of *Orbits*, Horton was fiddling compulsively with a flatbed scanner in his studio, scattering bits and pieces of studio stuff—pencils, erasers, bottle caps, loose change, a bicycle key, batteries, a yellowed stopwatch—on its glass surface. Millimetre by millimetre, he nudged the objects in an evolving dance, scanning their progress increment by increment. He called it a *Haptic Session* (2009), after developmental psychologist Jean Piaget's description of the sensation of recognizing objects by touch alone. He made three *Haptic Sessions* from 2009 to 2012: one in Toronto, one in Chicago and one in a post-Grange Prize sojourn to Barcelona.

The physicality of Horton's hands-on gesture belies its presentation, as a swirling choreography of detritus that seems ruled, in jerky step-by-stepness, by a crude mechanism. Or does it? Part of the charm of Horton's oeuvre is its otherworldly, technology-centred mediation, which he anchors in the handmade. There's that joyful bit again: Horton would pore over the flatbed at all hours of the day or night, nudging, shifting and rearranging, until he'd fall face-down on the desk, asleep. Captivating as the *Haptic Sessions* are, one gets the sense that no one was more captivated than their maker.

That uncanny sense of labour, of Horton's need to intervene physically in the objects surrounding him, has always been apparent. Ian Carr-Harris taught Horton when he arrived at the Ontario College of Art. "He was always experimenting, especially around his use of the body, and that set him apart from the other students," Carr-Harris says. "Art is really a form for him to understand how to relate to the larger world."

After two years at Guelph University studying philosophy and taking

Orbits: Red Plate Tokyo 2009  
Archival inkjet print 1.34 m x 101.5 cm

art classes on the side, Horton transferred to OCA and Carr-Harris's sculpture program. "There was the old-school art-college idea, which rested on an intuitive response to things, and in fact a certain disregard for research and reference. That was still very much in place," Carr-Harris says. His sculpture program "was a framework that was opposed to those ideas. We understood that sculpture had no boundaries, that it was really about the nature of the object, whether you chose to make objects or understand them through other means. It gave him carte blanche to pursue the references that he wanted to bring to the table."

References have always been important to Horton. If you ask, he'll tell you that knowledge, for him, is an endless quest. When I spoke with him in June, he was in Rome, taking the opportunity after the Venice Biennale to catch up with some personal totems in art history. He had just been to Trajan's Column, the towering obelisk around which winds the pictorial narrative of Emperor Trajan's victory in the Dacian wars.

Horton had studied it, from afar via photos, while he was working on his *Drawing of the History of the First World War* (2008), a densely spiralling series of eight graphite drawings. He'd been locked in study of how artists had depicted the epic through the ages—Hans Memling's quixotic attempts to capture the entire Christian myth in two or three paintings, and Hieronymus Bosch's *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things* (ca. 1500), which captures all of human failing on a tabletop. Trajan's Column, though, had special significance.

"Trajan's Column was essential to me finding a form to depict that," he says. "I wasn't looking to depict the First World War, literally. Everything starts off in a tight spiral, but by the time you get to the eighth drawing, it looks like a pile—you can barely decipher it."

"There's always this entropy that enters into these things, with the great efforts to make things coherent, and then the haunting shadow of incoherence," he says. "The drawings are a neat example of that: for me, it is always a matter of working from the state of complete incoherence and slowly drawing out, through detail, through pinching small points, coaxing out some kind of coherence."

**WITH HORTON, THINGS** just happen. Like Sligo.

Immediately after the Grange Prize, Horton packed up his life in Toronto while recovering from surgery and went to Barcelona. "It was really throwing a dart at the dartboard, just looking for somewhere warm, and away from everything," he said. For three months, he read. Then, one day, an email from Canadian-Irish curator Seamus Kealy arrived. Kealy knew Horton from his time in Toronto at the Blackwood Gallery. He told Horton that the Sligo contemporary art institute the Model, where he was now based, was shutting down for December. If Horton wanted to partake of a free live-in studio space, he should feel free.

When Horton arrived, it was to a cold, dark and empty building with the heat turned off. He found himself slipping into what he calls "the zero



state—kind of being pissed off that I had been left in this place, all by myself," he says. Cold and alone, a few days before Christmas, he grabbed his camera and in a fit of pique, snapped a self-portrait. "It was just to document this zero state, but the light happened to streak it. And that's when I realized: this nothing is starting to produce something."

Horton started to see the light bleeds in subsequent shots as painting with the camera. "Nothing had become a surplus. I had an endless palette to produce with. All of a sudden, I had a monster factory."

The series debuted at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge last fall and the references leap from the pictures—Francis Bacon, most bluntly, with his predilection to do violence to the figures in his paintings, updated for the digital age. Horton claims no such angst. "It's an object-oriented system of constructing images," he says, matter-of-factly. "But that's the joy, isn't it—when a system produces a monster."

Whatever else the *Sligo Heads* are, they are utterly Kristan Horton, crafted with the tools at hand in the immediacy of the moment. Idiosyncrasy isn't so much a career choice as a state of being. Not that he minds.

"I was listening to the BBC's five-minute interview with Anish Kapoor. They asked him, 'What do you intend as an artist?'"

"He said, 'Nothing. Because it leaves room.' Nothing!" he laughs.

"I like that." ■